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SUBJECT: SMER TIGHTENS THE SCREWS ON MECIAR

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¶1. (SBU) With junior coalition partner HZDS unwilling to fire Minister of Agriculture Miroslav Jurena in response to widespread corruption at the ministry's land distribution fund, Prime Minister Robert Fico's (Smer) surrogates are tightening the screws on HZDS in the local media, leaving the impression that Fico is preparing to remove HZDS from the coalition. Reflecting Fico's disgust with HZDS and its leader, Vladimir Meciar, Smer spokeswoman Silvia Glendova declared on November 20 that "Smer is not interested in participating in a coalition that would tolerate such managing of land in the Slovak land fund." Glendova's comments up the ante from Smer's November 13 statement, in which she announced that HZDS would have to fire Jurena's appointee to the land fund, Branislav Briza, as a precondition for remaining in the coalition (see reftel). Briza subsequently resigned, but Fico is not yet done making HZDS and Meciar pay the price for the scandal. Nor is Fico done trying to show that his administration -- allegedly unlike its predecessor -- is willing to fight corruption.

¶2. (SBU) Glendova's comments, which consistently reflect the Prime Minister's thinking in terms of both substance and blunt style, have provoked a series of local headlines suggesting the end of the coalition is near. These include: "Fico shows Meciar the doors," "Meciar's days numbered," and the ultimate Smer insult, "Meciar is like Dzurinda". Such headlines accurately reflect the level of conflict between Smer and HZDS, but exaggerate reports of the coalition's imminent demise. Fico sensed from the beginning that the scandal would seriously weaken Meciar, and his instincts appear to be proven correct by a poll released on November 19, which indicated that HZDS voter preference has fallen to 6.2 percent -- a level barely over the threshold needed for HZDS to retain its presence in parliament if the coalition were disbanded and early elections called. Recognizing that their livelihoods are in jeopardy, HZDS leaders (including Meciar) have refrained from their standard practice of criticizing Smer in the media and have taken an unusually conciliatory tone in recent days.

A Smer view

¶3. (SBU) It remains unclear what Fico is attempting to extract from HZDS, or what might cause Fico to reach the breaking point. Smer MP Robert Madej told Poloff today (in a 3-minute cell phone conversation) that Smer simply wants HZDS to come up with an internal substitute for Minister Jurena and to make commitments on upcoming appointments and legislation on economic issues, including taxes and health care. He left the clear impression that Fico would give HZDS some time to comply with his demand to fire Jurena, but that the demand was final. Madej, a young Smer leader responsible for developing policy on labor, family and social issues, does not participate in coalition leadership meetings. He

would not discuss the possibility of early elections. Prior to this latest clash with Meciar, the Prime Minister's Chief of Protocol and Foreign Relations advisor had told DCM that Fico was not interested in early elections. The current conflict at least makes Fico more willing to play brinkmanship with his coalition partner.

An opposition view

14. (SBU) Many opposition party members are already treating 2008 elections as a fait accompli. In a long-ranging discussion on agriculture policy and coalition politics, former Minister of Agriculture and current MP Zsolt Simon (SMK) told Poloff that he believed that this scandal probably did mark the eventual (but not imminent) end of the coalition. Simon believes that Fico will start preparing the party apparatus shortly after the new year, then call for elections in May or June 2008. He believes that HZDS would hover around the 5 percent threshold in these elections, with nearly all of the party's lost support migrating to Smer or SNS. Simon discounts the possibility that any of the opposition parties - SDKU, KDH, or SMK - would even be considered by Smer for an alliance given Fico's strength, though he thinks SDKU might bite if offered. Fico wants 2008 elections, according to Simon, not only to get rid of Meciar but also to secure another four years in advance of the 2009 adoption of the euro. Regarding the scandal itself, he views Minister Jurena (not Briza) as the man responsible for corruption within the fund, calling him the "least competent minister in the government, except in arranging land deals." Simon added that HZDS' attempts to muddy the waters by assigning blame to Smer for the scandal are completely baseless.

SILVERMAN